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The Coalition of Essential Schools Announces "It's Elementary" a PreK-8th Grade National Initiative

Type: Horace Feature

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Source: *Horace* Fall 2007, Vol. 23 No. 3



In March 2006, Deborah Meier asked Harmony Education Center (HEC) in Bloomington, Indiana to lead a national effort to engage more pre-kindergarten through eighth grade schools across the country in the work of CES. Debbie believed that although CES had always welcomed these schools, elementary educators felt that high schools had always received more attention and benefits from CES membership and participation at the Fall Forum. She said that HEC – home to a CES Center, Harmony School (a 200 student preK-12th grade school that has been a member of CES since 1994), and the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) – was well positioned to coordinate this national effort.

We followed up on Debbie's suggestion to collaborate with Laura Baker, Director of the Greenfield Center School in Greenfield, Massachusetts, in the exploration of this new CES initiative. After consultation with CES's Executive Director Lewis Cohen, I contacted Brett Bradshaw at CES National and collected statistics that described elementary membership and participation at the Fall Forum. Brett confirmed that fewer than 20 percent of all member schools were elementary schools and fewer than 10 percent of Fall Forum participants identified themselves as elementary teachers.

In July 2006, Lewis and I presented a draft of a plan for this elementary initiative at the CES Center Directors Meeting in Tacoma. After receiving endorsement of the plan, we formed a committee comprised of Debbie Meier, Laura Baker, Nancy Fenton from CES Michigan, Carol Foresta from the Progressive Educator's Network of New York, national NSRF director Steven Strull, and HEC senior fellow Daniel Baron. The committee organized pre-conference and closing sessions at the 2006 Fall Forum at which the "It's Elementary" initiative was discussed, further developed, and enthusiastically affirmed by more than 100 elementary educators in attendance.

The plan is that this new CES initiative will replicate some of the most powerful aspects of the CES Small Schools Network. We will refine a common vision of a strong implementation of the ten Common Principles at the preK-eighth grade levels. In addition, the elementary network will document and disseminate effective elementary and middle school practices, develop a common agenda and language for research in such CES schools, create partnerships, advocate for progressive practices, and maintain the gains of participating schools.

In May 2006, the Greenfield Center School in Greenfield, Massachusetts hosted the first meeting of the New England Center of Progressive Elementary Education, the New England Center for this national initiative. (For more on NECPEE and what's happening at Greenfield Center School, see Laura Baker's "Making Sense of the Principles: An Elementary Perspective" on page four of this issue.)

At the 2007 Fall Forum in Denver, there will be at least 25 elementary-focused sessions and a closing session on Saturday, November 10 to plan next steps in the exciting development of this national network.

As Debbie Meier wrote in the opening article of this issue of *Horace*, CES elementary schools should, in addition to reflecting the ten Common Principles, "focus on the connection between family and home, pay attention to the importance of the arts and imagination in defining what it means to use one's mind well, and emphasize the role of play, hands-and-minds, and self-initiated adventures. The responsibility of the "It's Elementary" initiative is the support, development, documentation, and dissemination of, as Debbie describes it, "a different kind of elementary and pre-elementary education."

To express interest in joining or for more information on "It's Elementary," please contact Scott Hutchinson at Harmony Education Center at hutchinson@harmonyschool.org or 812.334.8379.

Steve and Barbara Bonchek started Harmony School in 1974. The school has grown into a multi-faceted national organization that promotes democracy, equity and social justice. To contact Steve and Barb, please email harmony@indiana.edu.

This resource last updated: February 22, 2008

Database Information:

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| <p>Source: <i>Horace</i> Fall 2007, Vol. 23 No. 3 Publication Year: 2007 Publisher: CES National School Level: Elementary Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent Issue: 23.3 Focus Area: Community Connections STRAND: Community Connections: community collaboration</p> |
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